Unit .29

Session .02

Trusting in Christ in Life and Death

Scripture

Acts 6:8-10; 7:44-51,54-60

8 Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. **10** But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. … **44** "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the testimony in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses commanded him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. **45** Our ancestors in turn received it and with Joshua brought it in when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before them, until the days of David. **46** He found favor in God's sight and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. **47** It was Solomon, rather, who built him a house, **48** but the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries made with hands, as the prophet says: **49** Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool. What sort of house will you build for me? says the Lord, or what will be my resting place? **50** Did not my hand make all these things? **51** "You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also. … **54** When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. **55** Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56** He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" **57** They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. **58** They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" **60** He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he fell asleep.

Intro Options

Main Point:
The Spirit empowers God's people to boldly proclaim the gospel, even in the face of death.

Option 1

Give each of your students a sheet of paper and writing utensil (if you have a large group, students could also do this activity in teams).

Describe the following three scenarios:

- Someone has scheduled to meet with a non-Christian friend to share his faith.
- Someone plans to meet with a less mature Christian to help explain a difficult Scripture passage.
- Someone is facing persecution for her faith (whether it's being harassed in school or something even worse—perhaps a Christian in Iran, for example).

Students should choose one of the three scenarios and imagine that person has written to them asking for some help. The students should write a short note to help the person.

Invite students to share their notes with the group. Discuss what they have in common, such as suggesting to pray for the Spirit's help. Explain that in today's lesson, we'll see how Christians can rely on the Spirit's empowering.

Option 2

This activity can be done as individuals or in groups. Give each group an index card or a sheet of paper. On that sheet of paper, each student (group) should create a scenario where something has gone wrong and Batman has to come save the day.

Once all students have written their scenario, they should toss them into a pile. Mix the scenarios up and pass them back out, making sure no students get their same scenario back. This time, the student (group) has to pretend they are Alfred (Batman's butler). Their job is to design a Bat-suit, a Bat-vehicle, or a Bat-weapon to give to Batman to help him with this particular situation. Let groups share their situation and the solution they came up with as Alfred.

The point of this exercise is to show how Alfred comes up with something particular to help Batman in every situation. In our lesson today, we'll see that the Holy Spirit empowers God's people as they face each particular situation: even death.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 6:8-10.

Superhero movie franchises show the power of a good story. Grown adults and small children alike dress up in costumes, stand in line for hours, and spend absurd amounts of money on popcorn and soda to watch larger-than-life heroes do the unthinkable. People are riveted by an otherworldly story, and they're willing to go to great lengths to experience it.

- **When have you been absolutely captured by a story?**

In the book of Acts, we've seen that the apostles staked their reputations—and even their lives!—on the gospel. The gospel was the center of their lives, and it was a story they had to tell. Some believe that Stephen was a deacon in the early church and Scripture described him as a man "full of grace and power." He was certainly a godly man. As Stephen served others, the Jews accused him of wrongdoing in an attempt to stop the Jesus movement. While Stephen had wisdom, likely gained through life experience, training, and studying the Scriptures, his true power was in the gospel and by the Holy Spirit.

As we consider what it means to be like Stephen and speak boldly for Christ through the power of the Spirit, we need to keep two things in mind. First, we must always proclaim Christ with humility and patience. Second, we should remember that the Holy Spirit lives within us and speaks through us. Our boldness should not wrapped up in our own intelligence or abilities, but in the power of the Spirit. It's not up to us to convince someone of the gospel—that's the work of the Holy Spirit.

When we share the gospel, we will face opposition. Nonetheless, we are called to share, and as we stand for Christ, we do so from a position of humility, knowing that the Holy Spirit is the one who has even allowed us to believe the gospel we proclaim

- **What is your biggest fear of sharing the gospel?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
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Acts 6

"Stephen had been chosen as one of the seven because he was 'full of the Spirit and wisdom' (6:3), 'full of faith and of the Holy Spirit' (6:5) and full of God's grace and power (6:8). He was also mighty in performing great wonders and signs. As such, he attracted attention, both positive and negative. The first opposition came from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9). The 'freedmen' may have been descendants of Jewish prisoners who had been captured by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BC. These Jews had ended up in places like Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa and Cilicia and Asia (Roman provinces in what is now Turkey). They took issue with Stephen (6:9), but it is not clear what exactly the disagreement was about. Probably they were engaged in some kind of religious disputation with him and could not counter Stephen's Spirit-given wisdom and rhetorical gifts (6:10)."[1]

"Stephen is equipped for the unique things God has called him to do. Here is a Hellenist [a non-Jew] with the enablement that the apostles [Jews] have displayed. God will work through the various ethnic wings of his church. Following the pattern of church activity in Acts, Stephen's work is one of both word and deed."[2] "The primary interest here in Acts was not in these 'extraordinary miracles' (19:11) as spectacles, but in the sovereignty of God the Creator over his creation (17:24-29) and over its laws, not only at the beginning of time but throughout and to the very end."[3]

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 56, DDG)

Illumination of Scripture

Because of the vast difference between God's wisdom and ours, and because of humanity's sinful state, human beings are incapable, on our own, of fully grasping spiritual truth without being aided by the Holy Spirit through the process of illumination. When it comes to understanding the meaning of God's Word, Christians do not rely ultimately upon human reason in the process of interpretation, nor do we rely solely upon an institution or body of scholars. Instead, a Christian's ultimate reliance is upon the work of the Spirit of God, who illuminates the Scriptures in the heart and mind (John 14:15-18; 16:7-15).

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 7:44-51.

Barna Research recently released statistics on Bible reading: Eighty-seven percent of American households own at least one copy of the Bible, but only thirty-seven percent of people read it once a week or more.[4] The main reason people give for not reading their Bible: not enough time. And even when they do, the research revealed that they often struggle to understand what it means. This passage in Acts speaks to the importance of reading God's Word and relying on the Spirit to speak through Scripture.

The Jews read the Scriptures, but they didn't understand what they read. Because if they had, they would have believed Jesus (Matt. 12:5; 19:4; 21:42; Luke 24:39; John 5:39; 2 Cor. 3:15). Stephen told them that their misunderstanding of Scripture and rejection of Christ was due to resisting the Holy Spirit.

We need the help and power of the Holy Spirit as we read God's Word. The Spirit lives within us to help us understand God's will and character, so if we merely approach God's Word on our own, we will never be able to grasp the truth of Scripture.

- **How would you explain to a new believer that Bible reading is so important?**
- **What are the most common obstacles that keep you from consistent Bible reading?**

Read Acts 7:54-60.

Throughout the New Testament, we see that following Jesus is not always easy (Matt. 16:24-26; John 15:20; Acts 14:22b; 2 Tim. 3:12). Stephen told the Jewish leaders that their rejection of Christ was due to resisting the Holy Spirit.

As Stephen took his final breaths on earth, he echoed a cry heard not long before: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60; cf. Luke 23:24). Just as His Savior Jesus had done, Stephen blessed those who cursed him and prayed for those who persecuted him (Luke 6:28). Stephen refused to renounce his faith or seek vengeance, rather he demonstrated beautiful grace by the power of the Holy Spirit though to the end.

Jesus faced persecution and trials. When we follow Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised when we're treated the same way. And just as God used Jesus' sufferings to bring blessing to the world, He uses ours likewise. This is why Jesus was able to say: "You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven." (Matt.5:11-12a). Our momentary afflictions are nothing compared to our eternity (2 Cor. 4:17).

- **How will you commit to blessing those who curse you and praying for those who persecute you?**
- **How can the sufferings of Christ help us understand persecution?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
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Acts 7

7:51 "Stephen asserts that the behavior of the Jewish people in the present corresponds with Israel's behavior at the time of Moses and at the time of Isaiah, who "always" disobeyed God. Not resisting the Spirit would have meant repentance, along with faith in and obedience to God's new revelation."[5]

"The angry mob gets "enraged" by Stephen's message and, like animals, "gnashe[s] their teeth at him" (7:54; cf. Job 16:9; Ps 35:16). Instead of responding to the man's message in humble repentance, the self-righteous are outraged by it. But, like Jesus, Stephen has a heavenly perspective prior to his death. Stephen can view death positively because of heavenly realities. As the wolves prepare to attack, Stephen catches a glimpse of heaven (vv. 55-56)...Our brother Stephen endured a horrible death. People were hurling rocks at him, and he eventually died from the many blows they landed to his head. But before Stephen passed away, he offered prayers to the Lord Jesus, his words reflecting the prayers Jesus prayed to the Father while suffering on the cross (vv. 59-60). This beautiful truth helps us see how one filled with the Spirit lives and dies. Stephen asks Jesus to welcome him home, and then Stephen prays for his murderers! Only people who know the forgiveness of Jesus at a deep level can offer such grace."[6]

Activity

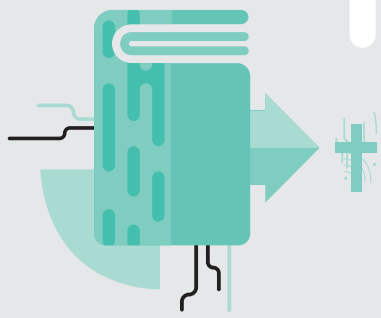
In a large group, brainstorm three lists with the students (each list corresponds with one of the three points of the lesson). The lists should be as real-to-life as possible, preferably even situations students would have in their own lives:

- Situations where you would witness about Jesus
- Situations where you would explain the Bible to someone
- Situations where you would face inconvenience or suffering for being a Christian

Once you have each list, break students into small groups. Each group should look at the lists and choose one or two that would be most likely to happen in their lives. They should then make a skit role-playing how they should act in that situation, based on the lesson today. After students have made and shared their skits, ask them, in those same groups, to spend some time praying for the Holy Spirit to empower them in those situations this coming week. If we rely on the Spirit's empowering to speak boldly, to proclaim God's word, and to face persecution, we should pray to Him to give us that empowerment.

(p. 58, DDG) Christ Connection

In his death as the first martyr, Stephen followed in the footsteps of His Savior. Both Jesus and Stephen were falsely accused and charged for blasphemy. Both Jesus and Stephen prayed for their executioners. Both Jesus and Stephen entrusted their spirits to God as they died. As a follower of Jesus Christ, Stephen reflected His Master, in life and in death.



TRUSTING CHRIST IN LIFE AND DEATH

Acts 6:8-10; 7:44-51, 54-60

TRUSTING CHRIST IN LIFE AND DEATH

The Spirit empowers God's people to boldly proclaim the gospel, even in the face of death.

JESUS CONNECTION

Both Jesus and Stephen were falsely accused and charged for blasphemy. Both Jesus and Stephen prayed for their executioners. Both Jesus and Stephen entrusted their spirits to God as they died. As a follower of Jesus Christ, Stephen reflected His Master, in life and in death.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

TRUTHFULNESS – Choosing not to lie or deceive others to protect myself.

HEAD

How did Stephen respond when members of the synagogue argued with him?

What was Stephen's response when the religious leaders began to stone him?

HEART

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). How did the Holy Spirit help Stephen to be truthful? How does He help us today?

When is telling the truth a loving thing to do? When is it not a loving thing to do?

HANDS

Being truthful is more than just sharing information or knowledge that is right. It also means that our lives match what we believe—that we do what we say we believe is right. For each statement and situation below, write out a specific action you'd need to take in order to live a fully truthful life God's way.

- Everyone should be treated with kindness. (A sibling ruins your science project.)
- God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). (Your teacher asks you to help her during study hall.)
- It's never okay to lie to get out of trouble. (If you get in trouble, you'll be benched for 2 games.)